

# The regime of inequality affecting the Roma community in Albania

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## Abstract

Despite the existence of official recognition and legislative measures aimed at addressing the challenges faced by the Roma minority in Albania, this marginalized group nevertheless faces adverse and challenging living conditions, restricted educational and healthcare opportunities, and a high rate of unemployment. The objective of this study is to analyze the above-mentioned difficulties within the framework of different forms of exclusion and inequality that form a designated regime of inequality, and to provide an overview of the present condition of this system in Albania. The primary theoretical framework applied in the present work is Sergio Costa's conceptualization of an inequality regime. The objective of this research is to illustrate the universal applicability of this framework by examining its relevance in the context of Roma Albanians. The present research utilizes a diverse range of data, such as reports from international organizations, scholarly assessments, and media reports, in order to conduct a thorough investigation of the unequal system that has affected the Albanian Roma community for the past thirty years.

**Keywords:** Xenophobia; inequality; entangled inequalities; Roma community; Albanian society.

## Introduction

Albanian Roma are an officially recognized ethnic-linguistic minority population in Albania. They are part the Balkan Romani ethnic group, who identify as Romani people speaking a dialect of the Romani language influenced by the Balkan peninsula's historical events and socioeconomic developments.

The Roma community in Albania has continuously been subjected to poor living conditions in informal settlements, that lack access to basic infrastructure such as water, electricity, and public services, as well as education and healthcare facilities. According to Robayo-Abril & Mill as cited by Meçe in 2023, the gap in compulsory education between Albanian Roma and non-Roma people as of 2017 was 31%, with at least one-third of children of this community remaining out of the system.<sup>1</sup> They have higher unemployment rates than the national average, and tend to work in low-quality jobs, which expose them furtherly to engagement with the informal sector

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<sup>1</sup> Meçe, 2023

of the economy. Unemployment causes precarious living conditions, segregation, and social exclusion.<sup>2</sup>

The living situation of the Albanian Roma is a reality of inequalities entangled with local, national, and regional patterns of exclusion, discrimination, and segregation. Social inequalities have been an omnipresent occurring pattern in the region, but only recently have scholars begun to actively investigate the causes and address the consequences of the inequalities.

This paper attempts to analyze the living reality of Roma Albanians within a structure of entangled inequalities, by examining some of the components that comprise the regime of inequality<sup>3</sup> of the last three decades in Albania. The scope of the paper is to provide a new example where the regime of inequality applies as a system, thus analyzing the theory on a practical perspective, and putting it broadly on a new localized context.

To investigate the “regime of inequality” that has impacted Roma Albanians over the last three decades, this paper focuses on the concept of interdependencies, which is explained briefly in the first chapter. The analysis includes three distinct layers, or levels, of a regime of inequality, as defined by Costa 2011, which pertain to popular discourse and stratification logics dividing Roma people from the rest of Albanian society, analyzed in the second chapter, followed by some compensatory efforts undertaken in education, which have failed to produce visible results in the third chapter, and concluding with a broader analysis of the legal framework, where the current challenges of inclusion need to be better addressed.

The theoretical framework includes reports and policy documents from many institutions, including the World Bank, UNDP, and the Regional Cooperation Council, as well as analyses by various authors and Albanian researchers, who have analyzed the living conditions of Roma Albanians. Media sources are used as secondary sources, strengthening experts’ thoughts and arguments about the unequal reality of Albanian Roma in Albania today.

### **Interdependent inequality patterns: the regime of inequality**

The term “regime of inequality” has no clear origin, having evolved as scholars sought to understand systems that sustain inequality in various regions and contexts around the world. During my studies in Intercultural Conflict Management, I came upon the regional context of Latin America and studied regimes of inequality following an intersectional framework that evolves around the so-called interdependencies, i.e.

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<sup>2</sup> Simon, Galanxhi and Dhono, 2015

<sup>3</sup> Costa, 2011

how inequality systems interlink with regional, national, local patterns of exclusion and individual characteristics, thus constituting a 'regime'.

Sergio Costa's Working Paper No. 9, 2011, on The Role of Historical, Social, and Transregional Interdependencies, presents the concept of a regime as a multi-layered entangled structure of interdependencies between social inequalities and various social categorizations (class, race, gender, ethnicity, etc.), with transnational processes that shape regions and communities around the world.<sup>4</sup> Regimes of inequality have various dimensions of analysis, that include national and trans-national domains like public discourse, logics of stratification, legal and institutional frameworks, as well as more local domains that consists mostly on types and characteristics of conviviality within a regime (segregation, othering, discrimination).

The above-mentioned paper highlights the significance of employing an intersectional approach in the study of inequality, and it also brings attention to the scholarly efforts of the Research Network on Interdependent Inequalities in Latin America (Desigualdades) to integrate various forms of interdependencies for the region, by constructing a framework of "entangled inequalities. Inspired by this, I aim to conduct a brief analysis of such entangled inequalities in a new context where studies and research on inequality remain relatively constrained.

### **Origins of inequality, from assimilation to categorization as second-class citizens**

Albania's communist totalitarian system, in power from 1945 to 1991, attempted to integrate and include the Roma community under the umbrella of a homogenous socialist nation, providing them with equal access to employment, housing, and education. In contrast to the anti-Roma sentiment prevalent elsewhere in Europe at the time, Albania's communist regime followed the homogeneous assimilation doctrine.<sup>5</sup> Albania's political isolation, as well as its lack of contact with other cultures for over 4 decades, contributed to the construction of a reality centered on a homogeneous community and an illusion of equality, which was destroyed when the communist dictatorship fell in 1991.

Despite the efforts of including Roma people in the socialist labor structures, in other domains of public and cultural life, there was a complete absence of knowledge on the rights, culture and traditions of the Roma community.<sup>6</sup> The policies undertaken from 1945 to 1991 were clear attempts to improve economic productivity, and they addressed none of the Roma community's needs. Their identity was suppressed, and

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Qejvanaj, 2021

<sup>6</sup> Osmanaj, 2017

the structural inequities that existed were never considered as an issue, because everyone was regarded 'equal' under the communist regime's harsh repression.

The totalitarian system not only ignored Roma identity, but it also indirectly contributed to shaping the patterns of exclusion that would emerge after the regime's demise. The lack of discrimination of Roma in Albania during the socialist period meant that no self-defense mechanism was in place, and once the socialist regime's protection ended, systematic discrimination began, causing a segregation trend that is still ongoing.<sup>7</sup>

The living reality of Albanian Roma today is influenced not just by the historical aspects stated above, but also by broader regional patterns of exclusion and discrimination that extend throughout all the Western Balkan countries. According to the Balkan Barometer, Roma people are widely excluded in all Western Balkan economies, with more than a quarter of the population saying that they would not want their children to share a classroom with a Roma child and 68 percent saying they would not want their children to marry a Roma person.<sup>8</sup>

There is a clear division between Roma and non-Roma people in many aspects of daily life in Albania, which is related to another underlying cause of the unequal regime to which Albanian Roma are subjected. Public perception and public discourse towards Roma people and around Roma issues, culture, and rights is biased, filled with prejudice, and many times ignored as an issue by policymakers and institutions. I would argue that public discourse is a significant cause of the systematic discrimination of Albania Roma, and at the same time the main philosophy behind the current logic of stratification in Albanian society.

There is a general refusal of the majority to recognize Roma culture and traditions, and although many Albanians might not express verbally, they act as if the Roma were inferior. Albanians view Roma as poor, dirty, noisy, and involved in theft.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, regional trends show that Roma groups in Western Balkans countries, including Albania, have internalized and normalized stigma and injustice. Roma people admit that they have experienced and been forced to internalize the stigma of prejudice, resulting in less-than-optimal outcomes in many sectors.<sup>10</sup>

The biased public perception and discriminatory discourse have already established a categorization structure in which Roma rights always come second, in other words, the logic of stratification<sup>11</sup> in Albanian society now considers Albanian Roma to be second-class citizens.

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<sup>7</sup> Courtiades, 1995, as cited by Qejvanaj, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Regional Cooperation Council, 2021

<sup>9</sup> Koinova, 2000

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, 2019

<sup>11</sup> Costa, 2011

Different studies on the perceptions of Albanians towards Roma support such an argument, and the logic of stratification is perceived as present and discriminatory by Albanian Roma themselves.

In terms of self-reported discrimination, the World Bank reports that nearly 35% of Albanian Roma felt discriminated against because of their ethnic origin in 2019. A significant proportion of Roma in Albania report experiencing discrimination because of their ethnicity, while looking for work, at work, and in school and the data, though significant, may be underreported.<sup>12</sup>

Albanians portray Roma as a poor and sometimes helpless community, and this impression derives not just from historical reasons and regional patterns of exclusion, but also from the logic of stratification that exists in Albanian society nowadays. Current public action and rhetoric contributes significantly to the exposure of the Roma community to systemic marginalization, which is regarded as a very difficult challenge to overcome. Biases, preconceived notions, and prejudices are not only affecting the daily life of Roma people, but they are also hindering numerous legal actions and grassroots initiatives, which are trying to advocate for more rights and inclusion for Albanian Roma in the Albanian society.

### **Unsuccessful affirmative action measures in education**

Olsi Sherifi is a young activist from Tirana, who has been working as a Roma language journalist for the public broadcaster for the past 5 years. He began working at the age of 16 and never skipped school, until deciding to emigrate to Greece for economic reasons. Later Olsi became involved in activism and one of his mentors encouraged him to continue his education and return to school. He admits that, while he was able to make it, this does not imply that the rest of the Roma community can, as integration in Albanian society remains a challenge for many.<sup>13</sup>

Olsi's story is one of success, but there is still a significant gap in access to services for Roma Albanians, especially when it comes to education. Many institutional strategies attempting to facilitate the continuation of education for Roma children and youth have remained on paper, and there is a lack of public discourse on such topics, highlighting the different reality that Roma Albanians face as segregated members of their own society.

Affirmative action in the framework of education was first introduced in 2004, when the Albanian government considered the issue of school attendance as a problem which had to be addressed, in order for the Roma community to have greater access to services and equal opportunities with the rest. A special education program was

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<sup>12</sup> World Bank 2019

<sup>13</sup> Euronews Albania 2022

launched, enrolling drop-out Roma children of various age in special classes. Later the government offered free textbooks for Roma children and introduced a law which would allow free transportation for those who had to travel far to reach the nearest school. Study quotas for Roma students were introduced in universities as well.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, such policies could fit well within the parameters of a compensatory regime,<sup>15</sup> however the research and data available on the subject fail to demonstrate a shift in the uneven reality to which Roma people, particularly children, are subjected. What the data and studies do show, is that these affirmative action efforts have not changed the situation drastically for the better.

Different international organizations and institutions, among which the World Bank, still report nowadays a high drop-out rate from school and low school attendance of Roma children, due to affordability of school, lack of childcare support for Roma parents and discrimination and social norms.<sup>16</sup>

Not only are Roma children dropping out of school at an alarming rate, but when they do pursue education, they are faced with segregated structures and exclusionary practices occurring under the legal framework that encourages affirmative action for Roma children in the first place. Compared with the rest of the population, Roma children have much lower rates of registration and attendance in schools, and data from the last census in 2011 shows that Roma people aged 35 to 50 at the time, had a higher level of educational attainment than the younger generations.<sup>17</sup>

	Children who have never attended school		Children currently not attending school	
	6 – 9 years	10 – 14 years	6 – 9 years	10 – 14 years
<b>Albanian</b>	2.1%	0.6%	2.8%	4.5%
<b>Roma</b>	44.4%	39.5%	45.2%	54.1%

*Table 1: School enrollment by age and ethnicity<sup>18</sup>*

Recently, the European Court of Human Rights found the Albanian government guilty of segregating Roma children at a school in Korça, a city in southeast Albania, violating the European Convention on Human Rights. Albanian human rights organizations are reporting segregation in schools in other cities as well, as well as obstacles in registration procedures, and access to school infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Meçe, 2015

<sup>15</sup> Costa, 2011

<sup>16</sup> World Bank, 2019

<sup>17</sup> Simon, Galanxhi and Dhono 2015

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.23

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, 2022

The segregation in schools has been a reoccurring situation, which had been considered as problematic by the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination and the Ombudsperson Office several times before. Due to a lack of coordination between the population's cultural diversity and the recent programs and policies, the current state of Roma inclusion in the educational system seem to have deteriorated, as statistics provided by the Ministry of Education in Albania show a negative trend of enrollment of Roma Children in Elementary schools and do not indicate an increase compared with the 2015 reference data.<sup>20</sup>

What have been intended as compensatory measures by the authorities in the field of education, have actually produced a more unequal situation in absolute terms, and this is a pattern that is observed not only in the field of education. As it was brought up by Olsi in the example above, sometimes emigration is considered as the best solution for many.

Segregation is a reality that extends beyond schools, in neighborhood, cities and other institutions. Segregation remains widespread, and there is a big gap in terms of material well-being between Roma and non-Roma, despite several legal measures taken by the government in the past two decades.<sup>21</sup>

The failure to produce positive results is attributed to many causes and is visible. Furthermore, in a situation where compensatory measures and affirmative action is not well thought, the conditions can even regress, widening the gap in access to equal opportunities, inclusion and addressing of discrimination.

In the case of Albanian Roma, entangled inequalities as a result of interdependencies between different regions as well as between social categorizations, can be understood by relational units capable of including all (important) aspects leading to inequality hierarchies, i.e., the concept of inequality regimes.<sup>22</sup> By addressing only one part of the structure of inequality, as in the instance of affirmative action in education in Albania, while ignoring other causes such as discriminatory perceptions about Roma and categorizations that exist, it becomes very difficult to dramatically transform the whole inequality structure.

In this case, the concept of regimes of inequality proves to be useful not only in analyzing the structure of entangled inequalities and investigate problems at their roots, but also as a framework which can address such inequalities and help by enacting better policies, improving legal frameworks, and removing barriers to equal opportunities.

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<sup>20</sup> Meçe, 2023

<sup>21</sup> UNDP, 2018

<sup>22</sup> Costa, 2011

## Lack of progress in the face of new challenges

Although the assimilation policies during the communist regime, produced a positive outcome of integrating Albanian Roma in the same institutional framework with the rest, with the collapse of the regime, Albanian Roma were the first to be unemployed, and they began to be pushed at the margins of everyday life.<sup>23</sup> The liberal reforms that followed the political change, didn't take into consideration inclusionary policies for the Roma Albanians from the beginning.

In policymaking, intersectionality in tackling Roma issues has only recently emerged, with new laws in place attempting to address Roma people's poor living conditions, inclusionary practices, and better access to resources.

In 2010, the Law on Protection from Discrimination was passed by the Albanian Parliament, addressing cases of discrimination, and aiming to reduce the exposure of Roma to unequal treatment. In 2017 Albanian Roma were officially recognized as a national minority<sup>24</sup> and since 2010, subsequent National Action Plans have also been approved by the government as cross-institutional strategies aiming to address Roma issues,<sup>25</sup> with the latest one planned to be operational until 2025. The recent action plan also includes a new chapter on "Combatting Antigypsyism" through systemic and structural change<sup>26</sup> which marks a new important step towards a more intersectional approach of promoting Roma rights.

Although there has been increased political action in the last decade, legal reforms, and support by international organizations to improve living conditions for Albanian Roma, still essential issues that affect Roma communities for years now remain untreated. Issues like civic registration and access to identity documents still deny to this day Albanian Roma even the basic rights of applying for social programs, employment, education and getting access to basic citizen services.<sup>27</sup> Albanian Roma face prejudice and discrimination from public institutions as well. They face ethnic profiling and are subjected to ill-treatment and improper use of force by police officers.<sup>28</sup> The World Bank also states that in Albania, inequality for Roma communities overall has not been reduced, though coverage and access to services, except health care, have improved among the marginalized Roma population.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Koinova, 2000

<sup>24</sup> Meçe, 2019

<sup>25</sup> World Bank, 2019

<sup>26</sup> Council of Europe, 2021

<sup>27</sup> Qejvanaj, 2021

<sup>28</sup> Civil Rights Defenders, 2018

<sup>29</sup> World Bank, 2019



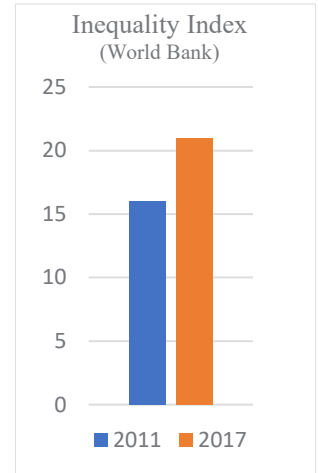
Even though the laws provide some 'positive discrimination' and try to facilitate access to services and lessen exposure to marginalization, poor communication of the legislation, insufficient funding, and implementation challenges have all led to a lack of progress. According to various reports and scholars, the failure to achieve favorable results in implementation is due not just to financial and implementation issues, but also to ineffective and poorly thought-out impact-measuring instruments.<sup>30</sup>

Legal mechanisms such as the National Action Plan 2016-2020 appear to be successful at first glance in improving employment and enrollment rates in school, but a thorough examination of the results reveals that no long-term progress has been achieved.<sup>31</sup> In Albania, not only has progress on Roma issues been slow, but Roma have fallen further behind their non-Roma neighbors.<sup>32</sup>

This lack of progress, makes the Roma community even more vulnerable to new challenges that might arise, like in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic. Albanian Roma were not only physically more vulnerable, but the measures imposed by the government to control the situation, limited their economic activities, which mostly happen in the informal sectors, and subjected them to unequal treatment due to lack of access to technology and resources like the rest of society.<sup>33</sup>

Under Albania's present inequality regime, the longer it takes to address current concerns affecting Albanian Roma and preventing them from gaining access to basic rights such as civic registration, employment, or education, the more complex and intertwined the inequalities will become. In the current situation several systems of stratification and inequality exist, preventing legal action, and affirmative action measures from delivering actual outcomes.

Although compensatory measures are being implemented, we cannot speak of a transition toward a compensatory regime. To address the current challenges, more long-term and feasible solutions should be proposed, focusing not only on legal frameworks, and introducing new strategies, but also on implementation, raising awareness of Roma rights and culture, and encouraging society and institutions to become more inclusive.



<sup>30</sup> Meçe, 2019

<sup>31</sup> Qejvanaj, 2021

<sup>32</sup> World Bank, 2019

<sup>33</sup> ERRC, 2020

## Conclusions

As I attempted to argue in the preceding chapters, Albania's inequality regime has been influenced by historical reasons, political processes, regional patterns of exclusion, and different societal and economic developments. It is a strong established structure, with all components of such a regime present in the current living situation of Albanian Roma.

All of the exclusionary discourse, the logic of stratification, the legal framework, and mechanisms used to formally address issues affecting Roma people in Albania have evidently contributed to the component of conviviality as well, where segregation and differentiation between the majority non-Roma and Roma citizens is omnipresent.

The example of unsuccessful affirmative action efforts in education is only one example, but many scholars and reports have demonstrated a similar situation in other policy areas, such as registration, housing, access to healthcare and to political participation. Grassroots action has just recently gained increased societal visibility and support, increasing pressure on institutions for inclusion and transformation.

The lack of visible results of the current legal framework is also briefly demonstrated in the fourth chapter. Stagnation of reforms and increased marginalization and vulnerability in recent years, despite the existence of legal frameworks to prevent exclusion, has had a significant impact on Roma people, particularly the youth.

The Albanian and regional regimes of inequality have not only driven Roma people to the margins of society but have also frequently driven them to migrate in search of better living conditions. Experts estimate that over 65 percent of Albania's Roma community migrated to Greece between 1996 and 2001, while EU members received more than 200,000 asylum claims from Roma people from Western Balkan countries between 2007 and 2017. Data demonstrate the magnitude of Roma forced migration from the Western Balkans, and these figures hint at the extent of antigypsyism in these nations.<sup>34</sup>

To summarize, Costa's theory or regime of inequality can be a highly useful analytical tool, as well as a framework within which solutions for the regime of inequality can be developed and implemented. To address the inequality regime in Albania, a more integrated and intersectional approach must be developed, with a focus on long-term solutions that not only address current challenges and provide more services and inclusion for Albanian Roma, but also ensure that previous mistakes, misconceptions, and attitudes that influence these structures are acknowledged and resolved. Historical injustices must also be rectified, with measures aimed at disrupting regional patterns of exclusion, while also answering to individual needs and concerns.

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<sup>34</sup> Müller, 2020

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